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ABSTRACT

The research of William Perry, the Harvard psychologist who documented cognitive growth in undergraduates, is summarized. Perry's theory is compared to Piaget's theory, and the view that Perry is an extension of Piaget is discussed. Also noted is the shift in locus of control and other measures that occur as students progress through Perry's positions. Perry researched transformations that occur during the college years regarding the perception of knowledge, and the culmination of his effort is a developmental model that reveals the sequence and nature of cognitive development and emotional maturation in undergraduates. The scheme of development is composed of a progression through nine stages. Three categories comprise Perry's scheme: dualism, multiplicity/relativism, and commitment. Since Perry's work is based on Piagetian theory, it is possible to see similarities. Both are stage theories, concerned with intellectual development, and have implications for instructional development. Perry's work is a departure from Piaget's because they use different methods and criteria and may actually be investigating different intellectual processes. As a stage theory, progression through Perry's scheme of development depends upon interaction between the environment and the cognitive processes of the student. Perry's search for the key to understanding the development of young adults goes beyond Piaget while using similar mechanisms. Further application of Perry's theory to learning style research must be done with the knowledge that the meaning and purpose of learning are dependent upon context and therefore the position of the student. Contains 8 references. (SM)

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PERRY'S SCHEME OF DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

Perry researched the transformations that occur during the college years regarding the perception of knowledge. He and his colleagues conducted extensive interviews with undergraduates at Harvard to gain insight into their cognitive development. The culmination of this effort is a developmental model which reveals the sequence and nature of cognitive development and emotional maturation in undergraduates. As the students progress from a simple to complex manner of thinking, there are shifts in many measures related to learning style.

It is difficult to describe Perry's model in typical stage theory terms. The cumulative knowledge of their years remains with young adults as they transcend each position. Although the model appears to be hierarchical in nature, Perry feels that the best model to explain this growth is a helix with an expanding radius. A helical model shows that through maturation the same life issues are addressed several times but from a broader stance.

Upon arrival at college, students progress through a sequence of positions, imposing a distinguishable structure on their environment in each. The students' present position also influences their approach to learning (Widick, 1976). Perry's rating interviews, which were conducted from 1954 to 1968, uncovered a scheme of development that presented a framework for analyzing their cognitive processes.

The scheme of development is composed of a progression through nine stages or positions. Three basic categories comprise Perry's scheme: dualism, multiplicity/relativism, and commitment. Each position is evident from the manner in which the student relates to knowledge and relationships. Perry suggests that de-

velopment is all transition and that the positions are simply well defined resting points in a person's development (1981).

Basis for Perry's Theory

Most students of education are somewhat somewhat familiar with Piaget's theory of cognitive development. Piaget sees human development in four stages, the last two being predominate in older learners: concrete operation and formal reasoning. Concrete operations is characterized by logical thought that lacks sophisticated reasoning. The formal reasoning stage is reached when students are capable of abstract thinking and problem solving.

Mullis et al. (1988) feels that older learners are typically in one of the latter two Piagetian stages. The formal operations stage of Piaget is seen to correspond to Perry's last two stages (multiplicity/relativism and commitment) since the thought processes involved are analysis and evaluation.

Since Perry's work is based on Piagetian theory, it is possible to note many similarities. Both are concerned with intellectual development. Both are "stage theories" which describe a series of natural progressions by learners as they interact with, and subsequently adapt to, their environment. Both theories have implications for instructional development, although Perry's work is considerably more obscure relative to this area.

Perry's work is, however, a departure from Piaget's theory since these theorists use different methods and criteria, and may actually be investigating different intellectual processes (Perry et al., 1986).

Perry's work documents the existence of complex stages beyond Piaget's formal operations stage. Therefore, formal operations cannot account for all that occurs in older learners. In this respect, the work of Piaget is incomplete

and does not sufficiently explain cognitive processes in adults (Perry et al., 1986; Talley, 1982).

Piaget's stages are concerned with growth of reasoning and mental operations at various developmental stages in children. Perry's work describes values and relationships of college students with societal conventions and authority figures. The developmental sequence Piaget describes is irreversible, but the type of sequence Perry outlines can, under certain circumstances, be reversed.

Three Categories in Perry's Scheme

In the first position in the scheme of cognitive and ethical development, students view knowledge and authority as absolutes that are either good or bad, right or wrong (Perry, 1986). This position, where ambiguity is almost unknown, is called dualism. This simplistic and somewhat intolerant view of the world gradually yields to multiplicity/relativism, where opinions become more diverse, but the student is unable to completely understand or evaluate them.

Progressing into relativism requires a deep reorganization of the manner in which students look at complex or ambiguous situations. Perry (1981) cites Piaget's processes of assimilation when incongruity is encountered and accommodation must occur to achieve a new balance.

The first relativistic thinking actually occurs at a very young age. Young children have think about their favorite foods and people relative to their context. Perry feels that these early experiences provide the framework for later abstract thinking.

The position of multiplicity/relativism, or simply relativism, is marked by a significant shift in the locus of control from external to internal. This is seen by Knefelkamp and Slepitza (1976) as the manner in which dualists and relativists

are distinguished. In this position, the student is able to see a diversity of opinions depending on the context.

The final positions involve commitments which occur within the context of multiplicity/relativism (Knefelkamp and Slepitza). This position evolves as the student begins to question and analyze the decisions they may have made in the previous position. They become aware of complexities and begin to synthesize multifactorial information. The result is a highly individualized schema. The person knows who he is; values, roles and purpose become more consistent and information from the environment is actively sought.

In the third and last category, commitments provide structure and focus to the relativistic world. Perry states: "It is in the affirmation of commitments that the themes of epistemology, intellectual development, ethics, and identity merge (p. 97)."

Studies of subsequent classes at Harvard have confirmed Perry's scheme with only small discrepancies. In higher education in our pluralistic society these positions seem to be constant. Other researchers at other institutions are tasked with validating this model and developing efficient methods of evaluation.

Positions In Perry's Scheme

Position 1–Basic Duality. This position is characterized by absolutes known best to the authorities who teach them. According to Perry "knowledge and goodness are perceived as quantitative accretions of discrete rightness to the collected by hard work and obedience . . . (p. 80)." Very few college freshman are still in position one.

Transition from 1 to 2. The first challenges, which lead to transition from position one to position two, often come from peers as the student encounters

new experiences and a diversity of opinions in the pluralistic community (Perry, 1981).

Position 2–Multiplicity Prelegitimate. Authority figures begin to assume their rightful role, but complex issues may still be found to be confusing. The young adult must learn to deal with complexities as they are presented by authority figures. Culver (1987) feels that this is the level of the typical college freshman.

Transition from 2-3. This occurs when students realize that they must search for answers themselves, and that the facts can still be very confusing.

Position 3–Multiplicity Legitimate but Subordinate. The student realizes that authorities may not have all the answers; for example, even scientific authorities do not yet know all the laws of physics.

Transition from 3 to 4. Positions 1 through 3 are based on absolutes delivered by authorities. At this point, the relationship between absolutes and authorities has become less rigid. The students realize that authority figures may not have all the answers. The hard work of a student may go unrewarded, resulting in disillusionment.

Disillusionment may take two forms, depending upon the student's perceptions of authority. A student who has become resentful or oppositional may become alienated. If the student is still primarily dualistic, the student will move forward in a manner Perry calls adherence; therefore, position 4 is characterized by one of two subpositions, 4a or 4b.

Position 4a–Multiplicity Coordinate with the "Known." Students at this position will structure their world in a dualistic sense, but within a different framework. They cling to their belief in authority and at the same time adopt a "personalistic diversity" which allows them a certain amount of personal freedom.

For example, the students now believe in a somewhat egalitarian manner that they have a right to their own opinions, but they fail to distinguish facts from opinions. People are seen as personifications of their opinions.

Transition from 4a to 5. This is the transition to relativism where the students begin to understand that some ideas are better than others. The relationships between facts and opinions begin to surface.

Position 4b–Relativism Subordinate. This position is dominated by the adherent students from the previous position. For some, this position follows 4a. Authority is trusted, even in uncertainty. These students will try to explore disputable areas and consequently begin to evaluate complex relationships. Perry feels that this is the beginning of independent thinking.

Transition from 4b to 5. The student realizes that life requires relativistic thinking in addition to dualistic. However, relativistic thinking is not yet seen as the norm. Rather, relativistic thinking is seen as contextual or "what they want (p.88)."

Position 5–Relativism. This position is characterized by the internalization of responsibility. Students use their newly realized skills in this period of lateral growth to explore alternatives. There is transfer of relativistic thinking to all disciplines. Authority acquires new limitations and uncertainties. Due to lateral growth, this position can take more than a year, making the transition from relativism to commitment more lengthy than the transition from dualism to relativism. Interestingly enough, Culver feels that position five is the stage of the average college professor.

Transition to 6. The following reactions of some students can postpone the entry into the next position: temporizing, a passive attitude; retreat, a morally

righteous political extremist viewpoint; or escape, a form of alienation which can become permanent.

Position 6–Commitment Forseen. Progression is described in terms of the challenge of commitments. The student becomes aware of some sort of internal spiritual strength. Alternatives are weighed and choices are narrowed.

Positions 7 through 9–Evolving Commitments. Students in this position are prepared to make choices and act accordingly. Position seven is where they make their first commitment. For example, they may commit themselves to a career or a person. Positions eight and nine, although rarely reached by college students, see additional commitments. Priorities are established among the various commitments. Balance is achieved among the commitments in a way that requires substantial reorganization. The last position would be most common among adults beyond the undergraduate years.

Learning Styles

Student development is related to learning styles since changes in one's concept of knowledge are reflected in their method of approaching information. Learning styles are mutable. The art of studying and finding information undergoes a documentable change. Transitions and the form they take may have implications for teaching and the curriculum.

Inferences regarding learning styles are based upon observations of the students. Upon restructuring their view of knowledge, students alter the manner in which they acquire it. Dualistic students are assumed to be field dependent. After the conversion, students report that certain words seem to "jump off the page" as do hidden figures for field-independent people (Perry, 1981, p. 103).

Once the relativistic position is reached, it is assumed that the student is

shifted to the opposite pole of their initial learning styles. Nine additional traits or aptitudes that relate to learning style are described by Knefelkamp and Slepitza (p. 54). The following are characteristic of students who have made the transition to relativism:

Locus of control. Students stop perceiving controlling factors as external to themselves and begin to establish internal points of reference for information processing.

Analysis. Students are able to see cause and effect and diversity.

Synthesis. Students in positions 6 and 7 usually are able to integrate complex concepts.

Semantics. In writing, qualifiers are used in greater proportion than before, demonstrating the ability to consider alternatives.

Self processing. A self analytical capability.

Openness to alternatives. The ability to accept opposing points of view as valid.

Assumes responsibility. The ability to accept consequences of actions even when there are unforseen consequences.

Take on new roles. Students accept demands of new activities and seek to master and increase their roles.

Risk taking. This is related to role taking; the student's sense of self is well defined and sufficient confidence exists to enter new situations without concern over damage to the ego.

In his years of counseling, Perry also found that many of the styles just mentioned relate to study habits and reading efficiency. An awareness of style and their stability is needed for instructors to optimize instruction for the students.

Perry also supports attempts to match learning styles with instructional style. Knefelkamp and Slepitza have found that when students have the opportunity to choose among approaches to an assignment they will choose a style matched to their level of development. Also, Perry notes studies by Kolb and Whitla which confirm that students who are matched to majors congruent with their style are happier and become more specialized in their styles. Specialization of learning styles becomes evident in higher education and continues through midlife.

Applications

Instructional strategies have been developed which accommodate the developmental scheme and move students to more complex levels of cognition. Courses should be planned to progress from concrete topics to the abstract and theoretical if there is sufficient evidence that the students are capable of multiplistic/relativistic thinking. In this type of class strategy, small group problem solving sessions can replace lectures. Through curriculum planning, the class environment should encourage self-regulation and the accommodation of new information to facilitate the movement from dualism to relativism to commitment. Mullis outlines specific examples in the area of home economics.

Reinforcing mature student behavior and not talking "down" to the students are methods proposed by Culver (1987) to facilitate movement from dualism to higher positions. He also points out that the characteristics of the undergraduate population undergo periodic changes. For example, when large numbers of

veterans returned to college after the war, classes contained more mature individuals who had a different mode of answering and asking questions. These older learners do not see the instructor as totally responsible for the right answers.

In the area of science education, Widick has noticed that students were capable of relativistic approaches to the humanities before they had acquired a similar capability in the sciences. Therefore, the vertical and horizontal sequences of development in young adults relative to Perry's theory are poorly understood.

Perry's work would seem to be well utilized by guidance and other types of counselors who help people set developmental goals. Widick considered using the nine positions as the basis for an operational definition of early adult development. However, she found Perry's stages to be insufficiently described with regard to their stages and limits for those who need to plan diagnostic and/or intervention methodologies. In addition, behavior patterns characteristic of the different positions have not been fully described since they have not been extensively observed. Widick also questions the transition process. For example, the variables that foster transition may be stage specific.

Assessment

For further applicability, it is necessary to be able to assess the position of the student with respect to this scheme of development. Knowing the student's approximate position is necessary to help him or her make the transition to the next. Practitioners would like a diagnostic model. Widick expresses the need for a reliable instrument which can be used to apply Perry's model. However, Perry and his colleagues have not yet generated such an instrument. There appear to be Perry "disciples" who are attempting to develop such an instrument, but to date there is no such validated instrument for general use.

An early instrument developed by Hartley (1973) was a checklist which Perry felt was not valid. Since that time, significant work has been done with Perry's model. An instrument was developed by Knefelkamp and Widick which includes sentence and paragraph completion. Also, Slepitza and Knefelkamp applied the model in career counseling, documenting the aformentioned shift in locus of control as the student passes to higher positions.

A brief questionnaire is the manner in which Mullis et al. attempted to assess the developmental level of students. They used the following questions to estimate the students' cognitive level:

1. Based on your previous experiences as a student, is there a teacher or class that made this educational experience special? Why?
2. What has been your worst educational experience? What was negative about this experience?
3. What type of learning situations are the best for you? Why?
4. Have you written term papers or taken essay exams where you are supposed to state an opinion on a controversial subject or argue pro or con with respect to a topic? If yes, explain what you liked or disliked about it.
5. What do you think teachers look for in essays or term papers? Can teachers disagree with you on such assignments and still give you good grades? Explain why.

Based on this technique, students who report that they prefer lectures and dislike essay tests are probably dualistic. Conversely, students who like writing reports and exploring issues may be in the multiplicity/relativism stage.

Summary

Through Perry's work we gain a snapshot of cognitive growth in young adults. Whether or not his work will ever result in a validated, general-purpose instrument is of interest to many. Some of the sharpest criticism comes from Widick who feels that Perry and his colleagues may be describing only the student population at Harvard. In other words, his methodology may have an inherent sampling bias limiting its applicability. Others feel that Perry's scheme of development is applicable to all traditional higher education students.

As a stage theory, progression through Perry's scheme of development depends upon interaction between the environment and the cognitive processes of the student. Perry's search for the key to understanding the development of young adults goes beyond Piaget while using similar mechanisms.

Typically, students graduate from college at positions 6, 7, and 8. To document progress into position 9, researchers need to follow students after they leave formal education and enter the real world. The environs of higher education appear to provide the context for cognitive development up to a certain point. However, different environments facilitate development differently. Does this development continue after students leave school? Are there similar cognitive processes in young adults who do not enter college directly after high school and what form do they take?

Understanding development is the key to understanding cognition. Progression through the positions is marked by changes in the way students approach information. Further application of Perry's theory to learning style research must be done with the knowledge that the meaning and purpose of learning are dependent upon context and, therefore, the position of the student.

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